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Regan wants FBI on call to plug White House news leaks

By George de Lama
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WASHINGTON—White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan wants the FBI to train a number of agents who could be called "on short notice" to investigate unauthorized leaks of classified information to the news media.

President Reagan's top aide said the White House had rejected a recommendation from mid-level administration officials to organize an FBI "strike force" to ferret out the origin of leaks to journalists, but that other steps to stem unauthorized disclosures were still under consideration.

"I think they [the FBI] should have trained people who are available on short notice," Regan said in an interview with a group of reporters. "Quite obviously, we don't know what the next leak will be, or where it will be."

Regan said the FBI's Washington field office is already charged with investigating damaging disclosures of classified U.S. intelligence and military information.

"How they handle it, or who they have to do it, that's up to them," he said. "I don't think they should have a specialized team, a strike force or something of that nature, I just think they should

have trained people available."

Other White House officials said the concept of an FBI strike force was discussed at a meeting of top Reagan aides last week but ultimately rejected because of its negative political connotations, particularly the comparisons it could evoke with the infamous "plumbers" unit that committed illegalities under the cover of investigating leaks in the Nixon White House.

Several White House aides said that a plan pushed by CIA Director William Casey to increase polygraph tests of administration officials was also dismissed as

"demeaning" and too controversial.

But Regan's remarks about the need for greater FBI vigilance underscored the Reagan administration's continuing concern with unauthorized disclosures that it contends damage national security.

The chief of staff divided leaks into two classifications: what he called the "embarrassing, disconcerting, nettlesome" leaks of domestic policy decisions and political information that was not authorized for disclosure, and the "much more serious" leaks of classified military and intelligence

information that officials contend jeopardize lives, military and intelligence operations and relations with allied intelligence services.

Regan said he favors the firing of administration officials who engage in "deliberate and repetitive" leaks of the former type, and backs the prosecution of officials who are found to have leaked classified national security information.

The President and senior members of his staff have also said they would support prosecution of news organizations for publication of sensitive information that damages national security under a 1950 law that prohibits disclosure

of intelligence gleaned from communications intercepts.

A number of White House officials have acknowledged that the decision to prosecute would be controversial, and said it should be considered on a "case-by-case basis" when a news organization discloses classified communications intelligence information.

"As to [the media], we do it case by case, as to how did they get it, why did they reveal it, under what circumstances," said one Reagan aide. "I don't think we can have a hard and fast policy where every damn time that happens, we prosecute."